

As Hearings Begin, Sánchez Seeks to Strengthen Sections 5 and 203

Washington, DC- In an effort to restore and strengthen the Voting Rights Act in its upcoming reauthorization, Congresswoman Linda T. Sánchez submitted these remarks into the record for the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution's hearing today, "Examining the Impact and Effectiveness of the Voting Rights Act".

"In my opinion and the opinion of many leaders in the civil rights community, the Voting Rights Act has had a tremendous impact on the voting rights of all minority groups, including Latinos. The Voting Rights Act is one of the most successful and exercised civil rights laws in American history, and this landmark legislation has effectively given all Americans political power and voter enfranchisement.

"For Latinos and other communities suffering from long histories of discrimination and disenfranchisement, the Voting Rights Act has been key to gaining equality and fairness in the electoral process. Before the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, literacy tests, poll taxes and intentionally discriminatory mechanisms were used to keep Latinos and other minorities from the polls.

"Today, many of the advancements and achievement of Latinos in our democracy are a direct result of the Voting Rights Act. Several current Members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus would not be in the House of Representatives today without the Voting Rights Act.

Members such as Congressmen Ed Pastor of Arizona and José Serrano of New York have districts that were drawn as a direct result of the Voting Rights Act. This vital statute also opened the door to empower individuals like Willie Velazquez, whose mission in life was to register Hispanic Americans. Today, we all know that his slogan 'Su voto es su voz' ('Your vote is your voice') continues to resonate in our community today.

"The positive impact the Voting Rights Act has had on all Latinos is evident. For instance, when the VRA was enacted in 1965, about two-and-a-half million Latinos were registered to vote. Today there are 9.3 million Latinos registered to vote. In the past three decades, Latino registration has quadrupled, while our participation in elections has tripled. In the 1976 presidential election, about 2 million ballots were cast by Hispanic Americans and in 2004 that number climbed to a record 7.5 million. In 1974, there were about 1,200 Latino elected officials. Today there are 6,000. I am proud that my sister and I are two of those 6,000 Latino elected officials, the first sisters ever elected to the United States Congress. While we have come a long way from the widespread use of such blatant tactics as literacy tests to deny Latinos of their voting rights, more subtle efforts persist.

"For example, in 1988 the Orange County Republican Party hired uniformed security guards to be posted at polling places in heavily Latino precincts. The guards, wearing blue uniforms and badges, were removed from polling places after the chief deputy secretary of state said their presence was an "unlawful intimidation of voters." The next year, the Orange County GOP paid \$400,000 to settle a lawsuit stemming from their voter intimidation program.

"Many communities still rely on the Voting Rights Act to maintain full participation in local, state,

and federal elections. In my home state of California in 2004, 26 out of 58 counties are covered by the language minority provisions of the Voting Rights Act. Within those 26 counties, there are 26 Hispanic communities, 6 Chinese communities, 3 Filipino and Vietnamese communities, and two American Indian communities where language minorities are covered by the Voting Rights Act. These protections allow millions of voters to make their voices heard on Election Day. California is also one of ten states with overlapping coverage under Section 203 and Section 5, two of the most important provisions of the Voting Rights Act for language minorities. Section 5 has prevented jurisdictions from redrawing district lines or otherwise amending election procedures in a way that discriminates against Latino voters by requiring those jurisdictions to get pre-clearance of any changes in electoral practices from the Department of Justice. Section 203 is vitally important to Latinos because it requires certain jurisdictions to provide bilingual assistance to language minority citizens at all stages of the voting process.

“As the U.S. House of Representatives begins reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act, we must recognize that Section 5 and Section 203 are not mutually exclusive. These two sections have worked together to protect Latinos and must be reauthorized together to permanently preserve voting rights for Latinos and all language minority groups. As the Judiciary Committee, the House, and the Senate, work to reauthorize the VRA, we must ensure that Section 5, Section 203, and all of the expiring provisions are not only reauthorized, but strengthened to preserve and cultivate total participation in the voting process.

“Voting is the one way that every American citizen is able to directly participate in our democracy. The Voting Rights Act is invaluable in preserving equal participation for all Americans in our government. This legislation must be reauthorized. I look forward to the testimony of the Subcommittee’s distinguished panel of witnesses. I am positive their testimony will begin the process of establishing a thorough Congressional record in support of reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act.”